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Don't backtrack on commitment to reduce class size

*Guest column by **Representative Martin Kiar**, D-Parkland, Florida House Democratic Ranking Member of K-12 Education Issues.*

More than six years ago, Floridians approved the constitutional Class Size Reduction Amendment, which demands that the Legislature provide our children with smaller class sizes and better learning environments.

In the current lawmaking session, a proposed joint resolution would place on the 2010 ballot a new amendment that significantly alters class-size requirements for public schools.

I have concerns about putting another joint resolution on the ballot. It is my belief that the current class-size requirements should be made more flexible through statute rather than another constitutional amendment. A statutory fix by the Legislature would be the best and most efficient way to provide relief to our school districts. Such a move would provide needed flexibility.

The existing amendment requires every classroom to meet certain caps: 18 students in kindergarten through 3rd grades; 22 students in 4th through 8th grades; and 25 students in 9th through 12th grades.

The proposed resolution maintains those standards but changes the current hard classroom caps to merely requiring a school to maintain an average student-teacher ratio. The practical effect would be an increase of three-to-five additional students in core curriculum classrooms, such as reading, math and science. Schools would be able to fall below the school-wide average by having fewer children in specialty classes, such as art and music.

Eroding the existing class size amendment doesn't make sense. Our state ranks among the worst in per-capita funding of our education system. But thanks

at least to the Class Size Amendment, the Legislature has been forced to put more than \$18 billion into overcrowded schools that would have gone unfunded.

Our state has attracted high quality teachers, in part, because the current Class Size Amendment has provided crucial funding for teacher salaries and has fostered a better teaching environment.

Further, student improvement shown in test scores has proven the value of the current Class Size Amendment. I fear that student learning gains will erode if the proposed joint resolution passes in its current form.

It is my hope that the Legislature can work in a bipartisan manner and make the class-size reduction amendment more flexible through statutory changes within the parameters of the current constitutional amendment.

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